

Toxic Stress – The Deadly Epidemic

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Toxic Stress, as coined by Dr. Vernon Coleman in 1991, refers to a type of stress that is inherent in modern society and cannot be managed with traditional stress control techniques. It is a pervasive and insidious form of stress that affects people from birth to death.

Dr. Coleman first wrote about stress in 1978, and later, in 1991, he realised that much of the stress people experience is a result of their modern environment, rather than individual circumstances. He identified toxic stress as a distinct concept, separate from traditional stressors like work, relationships, or financial issues.

The following is an excerpt from his book 'Toxic Stress'.

By Dr. Vernon Coleman

We live in strange, difficult and confusing times.

In some ways, largely material, we are richer than any of our ancestors.

In other ways, largely spiritual, we are infinitely poorer.

Most of us live in well-equipped homes that our great-grandparents would marvel at. We have access to (relatively) clean drinking water at the turn of a tap. We can obtain light to work by and heat to cook by at the flick of a switch. Our homes are stuffed with possessions. We have automatic ovens, washing machines, tumble driers, dishwashers, food blenders, vacuum cleaners, television sets, DVD players, computers, mobile telephones and a whole host of other devices designed either to make our working hours easier or our leisure hours more enjoyable. If we want to travel anywhere, we can climb into our own motor cars or we can (sometimes) use public buses, trains or aeroplanes.

We have become so dependent upon these “things” that when they break down, we become aggressive and irritable. We can’t cope without them.

We are surrounded by the gaudy signs of our wealth and the physical consequences of human ambition and endeavour, but loneliness, unhappiness, anxiety and depression are now commoner than ever before in our history. There has never before been so much sadness, dissatisfaction and frustration as there is today. The demand for tranquillisers and sleeping tablets has risen steadily throughout the last few decades as our national and individual wealth has multiplied.

We have access to sophisticated communication systems and yet never before have we been so aware of our ignorance. We have more power over our environment than our ancestors ever dreamt of having and yet we are regularly reminded of our helplessness and our vulnerability. We are materially wealthy and yet spiritually deprived. We have conquered our planet and begun to conquer space and

yet we are continually reminded of our woeful inability to live at peace with one another.

As the human race becomes materially richer and more powerful so we as individuals seem to become spiritually poorer and more frightened. The more we acquire the more we seem to need and the more we learn the more we seem condemned by our ignorance. The more control we have over our environment the more damage we seem to do to ourselves. The more successful we become in financial terms the more we seem to destroy the qualities and virtues which lead to happiness and contentment. The more we learn about our world the more we seem to forget about our duties and responsibilities to one another.

As manufacturers and advertisers have deliberately translated our wants into needs so we have exchanged generosity and caring for greed and self-concern. Politicians and teachers, scientists and parents have encouraged each succeeding generation to convert simple dreams and aspirations into fiery no-holds-barred ambitions. In the name of progress, we have sacrificed common sense, goodwill and thoughtfulness and the gentle, the weak and the warm-hearted have been trampled upon by hordes of embittered, entitled, miserable individuals who have been taught only to think of the future and never to think of the present or the past. Our society is a sad one; the cornerstones of the world are selfishness, greed, anger and hatred. Those are the driving forces we are taught to respect.

During the last fifty years or so we have changed our world almost beyond recognition. Advertising agencies, television producers and newspaper editors have given us new aims to strive for, new hopes, new ambitions and new aspirations. At the same time, they have also given us new fears and new anxieties. With the aid of psychologists, clever advertising copywriters have learned to exploit our weaknesses and our natural apprehensions to help create demands for new and increasingly expensive products. Our world has changed dramatically. Values and virtues have been turned upside down and inside out. Tradition, dignity and craftsmanship have been pushed aside in the search for ever-greater productivity and profitability.

It is hardly surprising that all these changes have produced new stresses and strains of their own. The pressure to succeed joins with the pressure to conform and the pressure to acquire and as a result, we live in a world where the base levels of stress are fixed at dangerously high levels.

Each one of us is, of course, confronted with individual stresses on a daily basis. Everywhere you look you come face to face with individual and personal stresses. There are stresses in your business life and stresses in your social life. But these are stresses that you can easily do something about. You can choose to avoid them if you want to. You can confront them or control them. You can share them or simply deal with them yourself. You have some freedom of action because these are personal stresses.

The stresses which are an inherent part of the world around you – the world in which you and I and all of us must live – are quite different. These stresses – the ingredients of what I call toxic stress – are not so easily avoided.

I invented the phrase “toxic stress” over 30 years ago because these stresses produce difficult-to-define frustrations. They produce bitterness and a deep sense of ill-defined, unexplained despair.

The stresses created by advertisers and politicians, teachers and scientists, journalists and

broadcasters are the stresses which, together, make up the unacceptable levels of toxic stress which are responsible for so much sadness, so much misery and so much despair. It is the existence of high levels of toxic stress which helps to explain why individual attempts to deal with stress have so often proved ineffective. It is the existence of toxic stress which explains why millions of people who believe that they have the stress in their lives under control are, nevertheless, suffering from stress-related disorders.

The above was taken from the book 'Toxic Stress' by Vernon Coleman.

About the Author

Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc practised medicine for ten years. He has been a full-time professional author for over 30 years. He is a novelist and campaigning writer and has written many non-fiction books. He has written over 100 books which have been translated into 22 languages. On his website, www.vernoncoleman.com, there are hundreds of articles which are free to read.